

Networking builds knowledge and confidence with the curriculum



Partnerships among teachers can build a powerful support base for shared learning. A group of facilitators from Team Solutions, at The University of Auckland show how such partnerships can take shape in the Auckland/Northland region. This report from GAYLE BRITTEN, MARGARET BENDALL, SANDRA JOSEPH, LESLEY PARTON and JO ROBERTSON.

Through the Network Learning Communities (NLC) initiative, the Ministry of Education supports the effective implementation of The New Zealand Curriculum (NZC) by establishing partnerships between school leaders.

Funding is provided through School Support Services in each region to establish and support networks of learning communities, each convened by a school leader. Once a group is established and its members committed to an approved action plan, the school leader has access to a small amount of Ministry of Education funding which covers costs associated with the learning group meetings.

The number of Network Learning Communities is growing. In the Auckland/Northland region alone the Ministry of Education funded 27 learning communities in 2008, then 50 in 2009 and now 70 this year. Across the country, there are 195 such groups.

Participants' comments include: "Involvement in a NLC provided lots of opportunity for networking, sharing examples of best practice and discussion with colleagues."

BACKGROUND

NZC learning communities were first established in 2008. They were convened by selected principals – called 'sector leaders'. Facilitators from Team Solutions at The University of Auckland developed a model ensuring sector leaders had the knowledge and the tools to support and challenge the members of their groups. Sector leaders commit to convening at least one meeting of their own learning community and to attending one review and planning meeting each term. These meetings are facilitated by learning community coordinators.

At review and planning meetings, sector leaders are drawn into a network of colleagues leading this work across a wide range of schools. Thinking about the NZC is encouraged, with the opportunity to discuss ideas with colleagues. Support materials are provided and explored, to be used either with the learning groups or in the leaders' own schools. In addition to the support of the coordinators, each sector leader has individual support from a designated facilitator.

In 2009, the number of NLCs in the Auckland/Northland region increased to 50. In addition to the principal-led groups, other teachers were supported to set up learning communities. For example, primary and secondary deputy principals convened learning communities of their colleagues; the principal of a special school established a learning community of fellow leaders in special education; and several learning communities for integrated schools were established.

A number of Māori-medium schools developed NLCs to focus on Te Marautanga o Aotearoa, or a blend of this and The New Zealand Curriculum.

THIS YEAR

In 2010 to date, 70 learning communities have been convened in the Auckland/Northland region by school leaders across a wide range of interest areas – from principal-led communities focused on whole school changes related to The New Zealand Curriculum, to specialist-led communities focused on learning areas. Specialist clusters include those involving language teachers (including a number of Pasifika languages), the arts, technology, English, science, physical education, business studies and social sciences. Communities based around a learning area most concentrate on the integration of key competencies and values, and on ensuring that their curriculum planning and pedagogy

reflect the research-based, effective approaches outlined in the NZC. Most of the learning area groups have a Team Solutions facilitator to support the growth of teachers as sector leaders.

There are other, new, learning communities. One group of resource teachers of learning and behaviour (RTLBs) is deepening its knowledge and understanding of the NZC related to classroom practice and student engagement. There has been growth in communities of middle leaders and there are now two communities of secondary teachers committed to research-based pedagogy for better learning.

Communities exploring the NZC can be implemented in every aspect of the school environment – in pastoral care, career education and even school camps.

MEASURABLE ACHIEVEMENTS

Building on work completed in 2009, five learning communities are now concentrating on the implementation of Te Marautanga o Aotearoa, the Ngā Whanaketanga Rumaki Māori standards and on realising the goals of Ka Hikitia. Two further groups foster leadership in ngā kura reo rua Māori in the effective implementation of the Marautanga-a-kura, which uses a combination of Te Marautanga o Aotearoa, The New Zealand Curriculum, Arataki Marautanga and Ka Hikitia. In 2010 the focus of this innovative work has been on developing a measurable student graduate profile.

Leaders appreciate spending time among a network of colleagues, supported by some external expertise, and concentrating on pedagogical leadership. Regular meetings for leaders continue to be highly valued. In addition, they value working in a group to make sense of key documents.

Learning community meetings are often shared around all member schools and one community even organised a bus trip around schools in their group to see how each school was implementing the NZC.

Quotes from Team Solutions evaluations include:

“Sharing action plans of different NLCs – ideas and various views are helpful; stimulated and clarified thinking; [useful] discussion near start of [developing] goals.”

“As always I go home motivated to find out more and do more – excited about the implementation in my own school – wanting to challenge and encourage my NLC.”

“Enjoying the luxury of spending focused time on one key element of education.”

“Kept me moving and on track with my own school and beyond.”

“Linking Ka Hikitia and New Zealand documents together.”

“Links between KLP and BES.”

It’s clear that it takes time, even with support from facilitators, for any learning community to build its own learning culture and master the practicalities of making the best use of their limited time.

Team Solutions facilitators say developing a school curriculum is both exciting and challenging for schools, and supporting this work as facilitators is particularly rewarding. Recently, two schools – a kura in Northland and a large urban secondary school – described their journeys so far. While each school developed its curriculum in a different way, they both put the child at the centre and said they came to understand the curriculum when “they got it in their hearts”.

KEY POINTS

- Network Learning Communities (NLCs) support principals and teachers to effectively use The New Zealand Curriculum to design their own school curricula.
- Each NLC develops an action plan to reflect their communities’ needs.
- Members of NLCs meet regularly to share practice, reflect on their own teaching and take back what they have learnt to their school.
- Principals, HoDs or teachers can be NLC school and sector leaders.
- There are opportunities to share practice between NLCs at regional training days.
- NLCs receive funding to support their work.
- There are 195 NLCs nationwide in 2010, supported by School Support Services facilitators.